

# **“To Formulate an Inner Strength”**

By Elan Bac

Copyright 2008 Foursided MFNA. All Rights Reserved.

Several small children darted back and forth from the cargo bay to the half-empty main cabin, laughing and giggling as they played a game. Jorge Strebado couldn't help but smile when they whizzed past his seat. He watched them and thought of his own two boys hundreds of light-years away. He'd been away from his family for months, but after this last trip, it wouldn't be long before he'd be home. Soon, he'd be telling bedtime stories about his travels across the galaxy. A loud sound reverberated through the cabin as the shuttle shuddered. Jorge flinched and instinctively tightened his seat straps. He looked out the porthole, but he couldn't see anything amiss. It wasn't surprising that the ship shook and rattled. Passage to planet Evergreen on such an old rust bucket was all he could afford.

With the money from this job, though, he'd have enough to retire comfortably. He'd be able to afford new clothes for his two boys instead of the hand-me-down rags they had to wear. Then, he could purchase some decent food for his family instead of the rotten left over scraps from the market place. They deserved so much more than he was able to give them.

He took a deep breath and leaned back. Only a little while longer and he'd make everything all right.

After a moment, the intercom system crackled, and the captain announced, "Attention please. I need everyone to return to their seats. Thank you."

Jorge glanced around when he felt the ship slow down. Maybe the shudder he'd felt before had been a dangerous burst of solar wind or maybe the old ship's thrusters were malfunctioning. Jorge stretched his legs as much as he could in the cramped seat and waited — trying desperately to remain calm in his restrictive quarters. *What was taking so long?* If debris damaged the ship, they might have to turn back. If they turned back, he'd be late making his delivery, and it would take even longer to get back home. They couldn't turn around. He had to make the delivery. His family depended on him.

When the ship's attendant hurried down the aisle, looking panicked, Jorge reached out and grabbed the man's arm. "When are we going to get moving? Is something wrong?"

The attendant pulled away and glanced around nervously. "There's a shuttle docking with us. Now just stay in your seat." Then, the attendant rushed away.

*Why would a shuttle dock?* Jorge wondered. A lump lodged in his throat and his palms began sweating. He tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry. He'd heard

about an increase in law enforcement in the sector, but why would a squad dock with such a broken down ship? He looked at the other passengers. They all had the same empty expression, as if they'd given up on life. How many of them were illegals, just like him, scraping a living from odd jobs that didn't require identification? Maybe it wasn't an enforcement squad after all but a border patrol ship or even pirates.

Jorge clasped his hands together to stop them trembling, but then his leg started to shake. His heart raced as he thought about pirates storming aboard to pillage the ship's cargo and enslave the passengers. As soon as the attendant vanished into the front cabin, the children got up and went to the window on the opposite side. They pointed and excitedly chattered to each other, but Jorge couldn't hear what they were saying. He slid into the next seat to get a bit closer.

The attendant came back and went right to the children. "You need to stay in your seats. Where're your parents?"

Ignoring the question, one of the children asked, "What kind of ship is that? Why does it have those two swords painted on it?"

Jorge listened carefully. The words struck him like a punch in the gut. Only one type of ship in the galaxy used the insignia of two swords, and that was a Kalsan Alliance vessel.

Everyone knew about the Kalsan. In fact, his boys loved hearing about the mysterious women and how a single Kalsan warrior could destroy an entire shuttle of pirates with her glowing swords. Jules, the oldest, enjoyed the tales about the few Kalsan who turned their backs on the Baronage and joined with the pirates and robber barons.

Jorge tried to swallow again. He'd never liked the mercenary Kalsan. With their abusive and violent methods, they drove fear into the hearts of anyone who wasn't a wealthy baron, baroness, or corrupt Mogul.

The idea of a Kalsan, or anyone else for that matter, docking the shuttle made Jorge feel nauseous. Regardless, it meant trouble.

He glanced around, but there was nowhere to hide. The small passenger galley held only row after cramped row of seats. He wiped a trace of sweat off his forehead and watched as the children finally took their seats. He felt trapped. One thing was certain; he couldn't be caught with the package secured around his waist. He closed his eyes and thought of his family.

He'd never been away from them for so long. It all started when he made the exhausting trip to the space station orbiting Jamurida. After picking up the shipment, he headed off on the shuttle to Evergreen.

"Attention," the captain broadcasted. "There will be a slight delay. Please be patient and remain seated."

Jorge shook so hard he was sure the other passengers would notice. Maybe he was just being paranoid. The Kalsan was probably delivering a message to the pilot. Although a message certainly wouldn't need to be delivered in person. No, he thought, *there had to be another reason.*

Jorge adjusted the small nozzle on the overhead panel to increase the airflow at his seat, but he still couldn't get enough air.

After a few tense minutes, he heard the airlock stabilizer in the rear of the shuttle release a burst of pressurized air. The airlock doors swooshed open. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a young, slender woman dressed in polished white armor move into the cabin. She had one hand on the longer of the two swords dangling from her belt. As she came forward, Jorge nervously chewed the inside of his mouth. He quickly leaned back and shut his eyes, lolling his head to the side, and made a soft snoring sound.

He listened to the sound of metal clanging, as she strode closer. Rumor had it that the Kalsan possessed special magnetic boots that allowed them to walk in the weightlessness of space, but Jorge never believed such a thing could exist. He peeked out of the corner of his eye, and sure enough, she walked from the airlock to the other side of the cabin with ease.

Jorge watched the Kalsan as she moved about. *What did she want?*

He drew in a deep breath and held it. The Kalsan's fingers still gripped her sword as she wandered down the aisle looking for someone or something. Jorge let out his breath slowly. He traced his hand over the slight lump under his shirt. Cold sweat trickled down his back.

When the Kalsan turned and headed his way, he shut his eyes and feigned sleep again. At that moment, he resolved that this would be his first and last trip smuggling Dima. When the mines shut down on his home world of Chicuhala, everyone at his station needed work. But each time a new job opened, employers passed him over for younger, stronger men.

One day, his uncle suggested that he talk with a man named Danto, who offered Jorge a job transporting a drug called Dima. In just one shipment, he could make more money than ten years of working at the mine. Although news reports

graphically detailed the unpleasant side effects of Dima, sales were higher than ever. The lonely and depressed craved the metabolic shift the drug provided. It seemed nobody was happy with their lives anymore. But, as long as addicts bought Dima, Jorge could provide for his family.

The Kalsan's footsteps stopped. Jorge took a quick glance and saw that she was staring at a woman near the front of the galley. He heard the Kalsan questioning the woman. "What is your name and what is the purpose of your journey?"

The woman answered but spoke too softly for him to hear. The suspicious look on the Kalsan's face sent a chill up his spine. Apparently not satisfied with the woman's answer, the Kalsan searched her and roughly shoved her back into the seat, then moved to the next passenger and did the same.

Discreetly, Jorge worked his hand under his shirt and pulled free the small package of Dima. If caught, he'd face life in prison for possession charges. He looked around and tried to shove the Dima under the seat next to his, but it wouldn't fit. If he hid it under his own seat, the Kalsan would know it was his. He blinked as sweat dripped into his eyes.

A few rows away, one of the passengers refused the Kalsan's searches. The ensuing commotion provided the perfect opportunity for Jorge to make a dash for the cargo bay. He slipped into the aisle and made his way towards the rear. Since the other passengers focused on the Kalsan bludgeoning the passenger, Jorge reached the bay undetected. Once inside, he shut the hatch and tried to open one of the crew's storage containers. They were locked. He tried another and another. No luck. He spun around, frantic.

Maybe if he just left it in the cargo bay and returned to his seat nobody would know it was his. He stared at the package in his palm. His fingerprints were all over it. It *wouldn't* do any good to abandon it now. Time was running out, and he had to get rid of the Dima before the Kalsan discovered his empty seat. She probably had a passenger list. If she found his seat empty, she'd hunt him down and then find the Dima.

Jorge rushed to the toilet and carefully tore off the top of the packet and looked at the innocuous powder inside. He tipped the package forward over the toilet, but some of the dust floated about the compartment. He pulled the lever but the toilet's weak vacuum couldn't pull the fine particles down the drain.

*What if the Kalsan heard the toilet? She'd know someone was inside.*

With little choice left, he dipped his finger into the powder and placed it on his tongue. It tasted bitter and made his tongue tingle. He poured a portion of the Dima into his hand and stared at it for a long moment.

A shout came from the cabin and he heard a buzzing sound.

*Was it coming from the Kalsan's fabled glowing sword?* he wondered.

He licked his palm and swallowed the powder. As it went down, his throat burned and turned numb.

When the drug hit his stomach, a surge of energy pulsed through his body. He felt his muscles increase in mass as they stretched the fabric of his clothes. It felt like his blood was boiling. He couldn't think straight, although his senses magnified. It was no wonder the addicts couldn't get enough of the stuff.

Jorge Strebado had never felt as powerful.

Then, he heard a knock on the toilet door. "Hey, you need to get back to your seat!"

"Just a minute," Strebado pleaded.

"All passengers have to remain in their seats."

From somewhere deep inside, Strebado suddenly felt an intense hatred. There was no reason for it, yet there it was — a festering loathing. Balling up his fists, Strebado pounded the release for the door and grabbed the crewmember hovering outside.

"Leave me alone!" Strebado bellowed.

The crewmember struggled. "Sir, release me! You have to get back to your seat."

The very sound of the man's voice hit a nerve and Strebado lashed out, striking the man across the jaw — knocking him out cold. The sting on Strebado's knuckles felt exhilarating. But a moment later, the room seemed to close in on him. He gasped for air.

He moved toward the hatch to the galley, stopping short when he heard a child cry. *His* children would be the ones crying themselves to sleep every night if he couldn't escape. His wife would end up cleaning the homes of the Baronage, down on her hands and knees, scrubbing floors. He couldn't allow that to happen. There was still half a package of Dima left. He mustn't be found with it. He sprinkled the rest of the powder directly into his mouth.

As the Dima accumulated in his blood stream, he tried to control the muscles in his face as they tightened and contorted. His heart thumped and his body twisted into odd positions. His mouth hurt, so he reached up to check his teeth. They were sharper and elongated.

Strebado opened the hatchway and peeked into the galley. He saw the Kalsan heading to the airlock with a look of dismay. Apparently, she hadn't found what she was looking for. All he had to do was wait a while longer until she got back to her ship, and then he could return to his seat.

He floated in the cargo bay, uneasy and restless. Soon, the airlock hissed and the shuttle shuddered as the Kalsan vessel disengaged.

*Had she really left?* Strebado wondered.

He scratched at his skin, but the itch was too deep. It felt like every cell in his body was irritated. Pulling up his collar to hide his features, he moved into the galley and went down the aisle as normally as he could. When a woman screamed and pointed at him, he reacted without thinking. He smacked her with his gnarled fist, and she slumped back in her seat. Strebado just stared at his hand. He couldn't believe how much power was in just one fist.

With the way the passengers gaped at him, he felt like a freak on display.

*How dare they stare?*

He no longer felt weak and powerless. Dima made him into something more...so much more. He deserved respect. No... he demanded respect.

A man yelled, "Somebody tell the captain to call the Kalsan back!"

Strebado scanned the galley for the troublemaker. He saw a young man with a flushed face. Without hesitation, Strebado reached over and yanked the young man out of his chair straps by his hair. The young man struggled and the passengers gasped. With his other hand, Strebado twisted the young man's neck. There was a pop as the vertebrae snapped. Now it was time to issue a warning. They'd all listen now. Strebado released the man and let him float above his seat.

Strebado grunted through his dry throat, "Nobody...make another sound...or...else!"

The galley fell silent. Strebado's hands shook. The Dima coursed through his body, and he could feel the rush. Such intense energy, as if his metabolism had increased ten-fold. A few rows ahead, he heard a faint cry. He found one of the

children he'd seen earlier. Ignoring the child, he continued through the galley to verify that the Kalsan had indeed left.

It was hard to concentrate. A million thoughts ran through his mind, yet nothing was clear. He had to focus. Focus on getting away. The Kalsan could come back any minute. If she found him in this state, who knows what she'd do to him. The people were gaping at him and it made him uncomfortable. They looked at him as if he was a hideous, disfigured creature.

With each passing moment, Strebado found it harder and harder to breathe. In sheer desperation, he stormed to the front cabin of the shuttle. He made his way through the narrow shaft leading to the cockpit and banged on the hatch, but it wouldn't open. With both fists, he pummeled the access panel until the hatch burst open.

The pilot spun around. "How did you do that? You can't come in here!"

Strebado pointed to the instrument panel. "We need to go. Go! No air here."

The pilot shook her head. "What? What's wrong with you? We're not going anywhere."

"Yes, go. Now. Can't be...where...the stars. Where are the stars? Move!" Sweat dripped off his face. His lungs cried out for air. "Open window. No air. Can't breathe."

"Are you serious? We're not at a docking station. We're still in space."

"Argh!" Strebado pounded on the cockpit window but it wouldn't break. "Burning!" He ripped off his shirt.

"You're crazy. Get out of here!"

Strebado grabbed the pilot by the front of her uniform and lifted her out of her seat. If she wasn't going to do anything, then he would. He tossed her across the cabin and pulled himself closer to the control panel. There were so many instruments. He shook his head to clear his mind. The buttons and switches all looked the same.

"What are you doing?" the pilot shouted.

Strebado couldn't seem to control his actions. In a heartbeat, he'd wrapped his hands around the pilot's neck. The tighter he squeezed, the more excited he got. The pilot's eyes bulged, and she flailed her arms wildly, scratching at his face in desperation. With one final compression, she went limp.

He paused for a moment and then looked out the small cockpit window. He saw his reflection, but barely recognized the person looking back. He leaned closer.

*Was this really his face? No wonder the passengers were afraid.*

The passengers must have known he'd taken Dima — they would have seen it in his face. They'd surely signal the Kalsan somehow. They were probably doing it right now. She'd come back and arrest him.

His eyes darted around like a frightened animal. He couldn't seem to focus on any one thing. His heart raced and his hands trembled. He had to get away. He couldn't get captured.

He saw the pilot floating in the back of the cockpit — either dead or unconscious. He tore off her uniform and slipped it over his throbbing muscles. The seams stretched tight and ripped as he forced the material over his biceps, but from a distance, he might just look like the pilot. He took her cap and jammed it on his head.

He'd seen too many of his friends sent off to prison. They lost everything — their wives, their families. And for what? Only old Farley had managed to make a go of it in prison. He had a source on the outside who smuggled small quantities of Dima into the prison. Farley then turned around and sold it at a huge mark up to the prisoners. But he was the exception.

His stomach roiled and his legs buckled. A searing pain shot up his spine as his vertebrae enlarged and strained against his skin. His shoulders stooped and his fingernails curled into claw-like talons. He felt the Dima seeping deep inside him now. Strebado was Dima and Dima was Strebado. The energy rising up from inside was impossible to control. He let out a yowl.

He heard the passengers scream for mercy. If they didn't shut up, the Kalsan would hear. He bounded from the cockpit, his ape-like arms propelling him along as if they were legs. The crew attendant stood by the airlock. *What was he doing? Signaling the Kalsan?*

With one bound, Strebado reached the man and slashed his neck with his nails. The attendant's blood splattered over the airlock hatch. Strebado turned and saw the passengers — their voices soft and quiet, plotting. They wanted the Kalsan to catch him. They'd stop at nothing until he was locked up — never to see his family again. Strebado threw his head back and roared.

They'd all seen him. They could easily identify him, which meant he had to silence them. Then he could pilot the ship to Evergreen. The passengers glared at him

with hatred and fear. They were weak and pathetic. The fragile had no place in the universe.

Sucking in as much air as he could, Strebado took hold of another passenger, snapped her neck, and moved on to the next. Then, he came to the two children, and their eyes met. There was something in the back of his mind, nagging at him. They reminded him of another time that he could no longer recall.

Strebado closed his eyes. He didn't want to look at them. With a sweep of his hand, he knocked one of them from the seat. His eyes sprung back open. He felt wild, untamed. He struck and smashed every one of the traitors in the galley.

Exhausted, he collapsed back in the cockpit. Bloodstains splattered and stained his entire aching body. As the ship drifted, he tried to remember the thing that mattered most: his family. He shut his eyes, but couldn't recall their faces.

When he next opened his eyes, his stomach cried out for food. He'd been asleep, but he didn't feel rested. *What had happened?* A confusing barrage of images flittered in and out of his mind. He forced his body up and drifted to the galley. His eyes widened at the sight. Then he looked at his hands, bloodied and raw...and remembered.

The pain in his gut was unbearable, and quickly his thoughts returned to food. Awkwardly floating down the aisle, he searched inside pockets and bags and found nothing. *Where did they hide all the food?*

Too frustrated and confused to continue, he made his way back to the cockpit and searched the instrument panel. He looked everywhere for the forward thrusters, but he couldn't concentrate. The colors of the instruments blurred, but he managed to find the distress signal button. He stared at the little red switch on the ceiling panel, and figured a way out of the mess.

He flipped the switch and waited. His stomach twisted from hunger, and he couldn't take the pain any longer. He crawled to the cabin, holding onto the backrests with his knotted hands. Then he heard a voice, whispering somewhere nearby. *'You're a fool, Strebado. There's plenty of food right at your fingertips.'*

Strebado looked around. "What food?" he cried.

*'Right there! In front of you.'*

Strebado saw one of the dead passengers.

*'That's right, Strebado. Waste not, want not.'*

Picking up the passenger's arm, Strebado glanced around. He shook his head and dropped the arm.

*'Don't be an idiot, Strebado. They're already dead. You don't want to join them, do you?'*

Strebado thought only about his own survival, and without hesitation, he gorged himself on the flesh of those around him. When he finished, he drifted back into his seat, full and satisfied.

Time seemed to stand still, with only passing moments of light and darkness. However, when the ship shook and the airlock hissed, he awoke. He wiped his bloody mouth and looked around. The cabin ran red and smelled wretched, and blood stained his hands. How could he explain what had happened?

"Stop where you are!" a voice near the airlock announced.

Strebado blinked several times and saw that it was the same Kalsan who had searched the ship before.

He tried to clear his throat, but his voice came out in a rasp. "I be pilot. Pilot me."

The Kalsan unsheathed her sword as white light discharged along the edge of the curved blade. She slowly moved toward him and ordered, "Repeat that."

He couldn't repeat it. He didn't remember what he'd just said. "Nar go...flar..." His mouth felt numb. The words wouldn't come. His body twitched and sweat poured off his face.

"By order of the Bezos Barony of Evergreen, I place you under arrest. You have the right to —"

Ferociously, Strebado propelled his body down the aisle toward the Kalsan with such speed that he rammed into her before she could react. Her boots kept her firmly affixed to the ground, but Strebado kept going and smashed into the wall. He pushed off and lunged at her again. He lashed out with his talon-like nails and scratched the stunned Kalsan across the face. With a huge fist, he punched her in the gut. Through his fury, he watched as she swayed, dazed. Even a Kalsan couldn't defeat him.

He looked at his hands. He could do whatever he wanted with those hands. He was unstoppable. He flung his body into the air and somersaulted in victory.

The next instant, Strebado saw a white flash and then felt a searing pain on his wrist. He watched in amazement as his severed hand floated nearby. As his mind tried to comprehend what had happened, he felt an invisible force restraining him,

squeezing the breath out of him. His eyes dimmed, but before he fell into unconsciousness, he saw one of the children hiding under a seat, peeking out at him. The child's eyes were wide with fear. He remembered his own boys. What would they think of him? And what of his beautiful wife Alli? Would she even recognize him? He closed his eyes and hoped he'd soon wake up from the nightmare and be back home.

\*\*\*

*Where am I?* Strebado thought.

He opened his eyes and looked at the stump of his arm. He sat up and looked around. He was not restrained, and there was gravity. He looked down and touched the black and white striped uniform he now wore. The cramped room held nothing but a toilet, sink, and cot, and on the other wall, he saw a cell door of metal bars.

He suddenly had the urge to vomit. Luckily, he made it to the toilet in time, but felt completely wiped out afterward and had to lie back down. After he recovered, he flushed the toilet and caught his reflection in the filthy water. The stinking mildew covering the toilet made him retch. His muscles were massive and his eyes bulged. He was definitely no longer docile, weak Jorge Strebado.

He dragged his aching body off the cot and paced around the cell. He jumped when a loud horn blasted, and the door to the cell slid open. Cautiously, he stepped out and looked around. The other prisoners wandered outside their cells. They were small, scrawny, and dirty with a hopeless air about them. He flexed his muscles and strode out among them. He felt their eyes on him as they backed away.

"Strebado? Jorge Strebado? Is that you?"

Strebado turned and gaped at the humongous creature heading toward him. There was something familiar about the man. "Who are you?" Strebado demanded.

The man, with rippling muscles and a misshapen head, stopped and looked down. "It's me, Farley. Don't you recognize me?"

Strebado stared. The man's head almost brushed the ceiling. His hair was gray and matted, hanging in greasy strands over his eyes. "You're not Farley. Farley's a half-crippled old man."

The monstrosity grinned, exposing blackened teeth. "Listen to me you puny scum, I'm the boss around here. You'll do well to get on my good side. Obey me and we'll get along just fine."

“Obey you? I'm Jorge Strebado!” Strebado lunged forward and head butted Farley, but the old man didn't budge.

Farley laughed. “I had no idea Danto had chosen you. I'll have to thank him for bringing you here. It'll be nice having an old friend at my side.”

Strebado took a step back. “You know Danto?”

“Business is booming. I needed an extra man on the inside, and he said he'd take care of it.”

Strebado's head was spinning. “I'll never work for you!”

Farley bared his teeth and growled, “You're nothing, Strebado. Go back to your cell. You don't belong out here among the men.” He turned his back and over his shoulder, Farley called, “Looks like you've tasted the dream. You need another dose of Dima, you know where to get it.” He chuckled and continued on his way.

The other prisoners followed after Farley like trained dogs. Strebado stomped into his cell and sat down on the cot, feeling small and insignificant. His hands shook and his vision blurred. Curling up on the cot, he tried to remember the things that mattered the most to him, but he could only think of Farley now.